

The Freaks

A Collection Of Five Short Stories

By Jono Ellis

51773.co.uk

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Freak #1 - If You've Got Nothing Nice To Say Then Don't Say Anything At All

Free ramen and cereal is making me go crazy... but that's the price you pay for living secretly inside one of the world's tech-giant companies. Still... 78 days of living for free inside Google HQ and not a single dollar spent. Clothes washing? Free on-site laundry. Beds? 9 different common rooms with super comfy sofas, 2 "sleep pods" for daytime snoozes and 1 storage room with a mattress that some previous squatter intern left behind. Food? The aforementioned cereal and noodle bars and in-house coffee shops... all free! The best bit? I don't even work here!

It started with a visiting day for fund-seeking startups - I came along to see if I could network with people to gain second-round funding for my awesome idea for an automated image recognition website to help people find their face/body-double/clone; you know - that one person in the world that looks exactly like you - my website can find that person. Or at least it will, with a bit of work and some funding! At the event everyone was given a badge to allow access to certain parts of the building for 24 hours. It seems that one of the startups was demoing their RFID hacking tool and, without my knowledge I should add, they swapped my badge's credentials for those of one of the senior Google employees. Come the end of the day I was still working in one of the hot-desking warehouses - desperate to make a good impression. Next morning my badge still worked so I hit the gym and then had a shower. Then breakfast. Then some more work. Then a game of pool. Then more work. Then lunch. Then the days started to go by. There was never a "Hey, I could totally live here!" moment, it definitely just evolved, but that was the end result.

Of course the important question is "Why am I still here?". You're probably asking why it is that I don't have family asking for me, or friends to catch up with... the truth is that I have all those things, it's just that I need to keep a low profile because they think I'm in a prison in Mexico at the moment.

I should explain. Imagine my surprise a month before escaping to the Googleplex when I was testing my new website with a massive batch of images that I'd cribbed from Flickr and I found someone that looked exactly like me. Being high on the success of a good bit of code I road-tripped it down the coast and over the border to a little Mexican town named El Sauzal. I found my clone body double pretty easily and we immediately hit it off so we hit some bars. Everything was grand until someone jumped me in the bathroom... I felt them coming at me and retaliated. Whoever it was that attacked me slipped and accidentally banged their head on a sink, causing blood to go everywhere: it turns out the guy was a cop doing a raid as they thought we were setting up a drugs deal! More police arrived, me and Guillermo were chucked in a cell together and suddenly we were having a very real

conversation involving me paying him vast sums of money and him taking the jail time for me for attacking a cop... we look identical after all! It was a done deal - he needed the money and I needed not to be in a jail in Mexico!

So until my business is a success I'm just a teensy bit broke and desperately avoiding the Google security guards. The guards are lazy and their routes seem to be set in stone - all I need to do is set an alarm so that I'm awake and well hidden at 4:30am and I'm pretty much sorted. Late nights and early starts have given me a mean gym physique and many coding hours under my belt! Palo Alto in California is the kind of place where looking good means looking fit, not necessarily looking awake.

The reason I was so "lucky" to catch the person who was about to "attack" me in the toilets is that I'm one of The Freaks; you've probably heard of us - we're the mutants whose powers are so much suckier than anything you'll see on X-men or The Avengers. No one is sure where these powers came from but it's a simple mutation in the DNA that means a handful of us, mostly in the Americas, can do things that "normal" people can't... really rubbish things. I, for instance, can see into the future. There are limitations to my "superpower" - otherwise I'd be rich, famous and accompanied by women who find me attractive - I can only see between 5 and 15 seconds into my future, and only when it's things in my direct vicinity... no predicting lottery wins, aeroplane crashes or the like. Although it can be useful in telling if a woman needs a seat on a bus because she's pregnant (or not, because she's not, and offering her mine would cause offence).

Most of the time seeing something just before it happens isn't all that useful - most of us Freaks downplay our skills - but at least I can change track in conversations if it seems I've said something wrong or change where I'm walking if I'm about to get stuck in that awful pavement side-stepping dance that sometimes happens when you're walking towards someone. Most of the other Freaks have equally crappy mutations, all seemingly adapting the individual very slightly to suit their environment. At the moment there is a big push to get some kind of database to register us... well not the people exactly but the mutations that they have to find if there are any useful ones. There is a little regionalisation to the powers that people have developed (immunity to mosquitos where that's an issue, lessened effect of cold in the north, ability to see sharks in the water in California, etc.) so it's not a surprise that scientists want to know more. I'm dead against a database - I've seen X-men! But being inside Google I started to hear rumours of other Freaks on campus and really wished that there was an easy way to find out who else was out there!

Life started getting interesting when I got an offer of some work for my website from a rather well-known actor who was desperate to have someone prove in public that he was not, as was being rumoured, a Freak. Getting some images of my mark was easy (a little googling took care of that), finding his double was a little harder - do you

know how many people use images of famous actors as their profile images on social networks?! I had to retune the algorithm to skip images of the actor that had appeared on well-known celebrity sites or had appeared on many different sites with the hope that it would improve my success. My payment came with a non-disclosure clause which I may have broken in the first twenty seconds by googling every single rumour website I could find to see what exactly people were saying about him. Whilst my program did its thing I watched a video on Perez Hilton's site reportedly showing the celebrity in a dark car park hovering about a foot off the ground.

I heard noises behind me and realised that it was almost security guard time and I really didn't want to get busted tonight - I shut the laptop lid and dived into the cleaning cupboard. By the time the coast was clear and I came back out of the cupboard I had a match. A quick bit of hacking to get the lookalike's address out of his Facebook profile and I was done - transaction complete.

After the gym in the morning and a busy afternoon's work I found myself looking at news headlines that I had helped make - the celebrity lookalike had been murdered... and I knew a potential reason why. Now I was presented with a terrible dilemma: present my information about how and why the body double may have been killed, which would admittedly give me and my site some awesome media coverage but it would put me at risk of a lot of bad PR, suspicions about my own Freak standing, repercussions with the Mexican police and, above all, tar all Freaks with that same murderous nature the celebrity showed. My only choice was to suck it up and keep silent.

Late at night I heard someone coming as I walked along a not so deserted corridor - I'd been restless all day and now I was paying for it by not paying enough attention as I went for some food. I recognised the whistle of one of the security guards whistling the Superman theme - crap! I was in a part of the building I knew relatively well and I knew that there wasn't much here in the way of cover. I sidestepped into the locker room - a small side room with some old school-style lockers for people to store away their cycling gear when they arrived in the mornings. There was nowhere to go - I did all that I could and dived into one of the lockers.

For some reason I didn't seem to be able to feel any of my normal predictive skills - all I had was a feeling of dread.

"I know you're in there. I can see you, you know - I've been able to see you for weeks. I know it's been a game for you to see how little you can spend and I was happy with that. But I wondered how far you'd go with your website - I've been checking your computer whenever you're hiding, looking over your shoulder from the other room, using my access to employee Google files to see what you're up to. I can even read your emails. After last night's fiasco your site needs to be stopped - I'm not letting you track down any of us Freaks. You, my friend, are busted. Assets

seized. ID privileges revoked.”

Suddenly I saw that getting busted by a security guard wasn't my worst future - my precognition wasn't working because I was at one of those hinge points in life where everything can change. I opened the locker door to be greeted by a guy a foot taller than me wielding a nightstick.

“You found me. I have to say that I wondered how I'd lasted so long. So what's your skill?”

“Seeing through solid objects. Makes me one hell of a security guard. Only works over a short distance mind you.”

“That's pretty cool. Anyway - you have to know that I didn't think I was doing anything bad helping that guy find his double... I didn't know he was going to end up killing him.”

“Sure - but you think it's awesome marketing collateral having your clone in jail in Mexico and that's just not right. You need to feel a little bit of what he's feeling - Freaks have no right feeling that they are better than anyone else.”

My experiment was over - as I made a dash for the door he hit me on the back of the head.

Freak #2 - Granny Said You Should Always Wear A Clean Pair Of Knickers In Case You Get Knocked Down By A Bus

Meanwhile... in Edinburgh, Scotland...

“Oh my god! Is she dead?”

“What was she thinking, stepping out in front of the tram like that?!”

“Didn’t she see it coming?”

“She’s probably seen news about it coming for the past five years - the trams have been so slow to arrive that she probably forgot that they might actually get here one day!”

“Has someone called an ambulance?”

“I’m a first aider - get out the way. Step back please. My word - what is she wearing!? She must be frozen wearing so little. Excuse me - can I have your coat to put over her?”

CLICK

“Please don’t take photos!”

“Yeah, not much modesty there!”

“I don’t know if she’s got much choice in what she wears - she works over at the kilt shop, she probably has to wear tartan skirts.”

“Yeah - but she could have chosen less revealing underwear!”

“I’m sure she didn’t expect to be knocked down in the street!”

“Shouldn’t you be more concerned about her health than her pants?”

CLICK

“Seriously stop - I think that she’s dead.”

CLICK CLICK CLICK

“She’s not dead - she’s breathing - I can see her breath in the air. She must be ok.”

“Can’t you do the kiss of life or something?”

“Hardly - she’s breathing. Just give her a minute to come round. She doesn’t seem to be too injured. Look - here she comes.”

“Christ. What happened to me?!”

“It’s okay - you stepped out in front of the tram. It just clipped you. You’ll probably feel a bit concussed but you look like you’re moving ok. Are you in any pain?”

“Only my head. I’m ok. The green man was on. Ow!”

“Come on - let’s get you back to the pavement to let the tram and the cars move again. I’ve got some Irn Bru that you can have - the sugar will help set you straight. There’s your jacket back mister.”

“Ha ha - good job you were wearing nice knickers - these photos are going to make it on to the news tonight I bet! First tram accident on the first day of trams running in Edinburgh! What luck that I was here!”

“That’s a shame - like Janet Weiss in the Rocky Horror Show or Ann Darrow in King

Kong or all those other actresses who get remembered for their underwear - it'll be a pretty unflattering image of her in today's news."

"Yeah - it's not nice to share pictures of ladies with their skirts flipped up exposing their knickers."

"At least you were wearing some dear."

"Whatdoyoumean?! I'd get a fortune if she wasn't!"

"Ouch. Aaargh! Bugger!"

"What happened?"

"My phone just went on fire! That's what happened."

"Ow ow ow - mine too! What's happening?!"

"Maybe that'll teach you that you really shouldn't take immodest photos of a possibly dead lady without her permission."

"Hey, are you ok? You can't just walk off - the ambulance will be here soon!"

"I'd rather go, if you don't mind. That was quite embarrassing and I'm fine, really fine. Just a bit wiped out now. I'd love some battered Mars Bar porridge right now. That'll restore me."

Freak #3 - Adventure May Hurt You But Monotony Will Kill You

A day sitting on the bed doing some painting and watching as Sean sat at the motel room formica desk hacking away on his computer had been very rewarding. She fully understood what he was up to (she had a natural ability to hack as well) but she'd decided not to do anything illegal for a while - mostly to prove that she could. Hence sitting on the bed, paints in hand, computer tantalisingly out of reach. The room was stiflingly hot, even with the aircon turned up full - Sean sitting in just some shorts eating ice cream from the tub, Georgie sitting in her underwear eating ice cubes straight from the icebox. Sean wasn't someone with a lot of interests - hacking for cash, listening to heavy metal and boxing more or less covered it - but he was dead into Georgie, more than anything else.

Inspiration for her paintings had come from the pile of vintage magazine which now lay scattered across the bed - those and the tattoos that covered her right arm, chest, ribs and thigh. Sean had six of her tattoo designs on his body too. Before starting painting Georgie had put on her eyeliner, darkened her eyelashes and applied the pinkish-red lipstick that was her trademark. That always got her in the mood to paint. The art too was her trademark - big dark outlined drawings of flowers, diamonds, animals and fruit with vivid shadings.

When the ice in her bucket ran out she stood up, kissed Sean and mussed his hair and wandered out along the walkway and down to the motel reception to get some more. It was almost twenty degrees hotter outside of the room, making it feel like a workout just walking that short distance. Any thoughts of dressing modestly had been put aside days ago - every adult in the complex was wearing as little as possible (even the cleaning staff) and the kids at the pool were mostly naked. She walked along the walkway down to the reception still wearing only her cross-backed nude coloured bra with it's lacy cups and the non-matching but pretty frilly knickers. Georgie spoke to the trashy lady behind the reception as she dug out yet more ice. As she left the reception she caught sight of a policeman at the foot of the steps, gun drawn, waving at her, indicating to stay where she was. Seconds later a handcuffed Sean was dragged down the stairs, past the reception and out to a black van, his mouth duct-taped but his tearful eyes looking at Georgie and begging for forgiveness.

How long had she been out of the room? Two minutes? Maybe three. She hadn't passed any police on the way out of the room or else surely they'd have taken her too. The pool was on the other side of the building, it was noon, most people were in the water or in their rooms with the aircon turned up full - it seems Georgie was the only one who'd even noticed! As casually as possible she walked up the stairs, looking out for policemen that had stayed behind but there were none. The door was

closed but still unlocked - the police had turned the room over but only taken Sean's laptop and phone. Still - it wasn't much of a mess, neither of them had much stuff to turn over anyway.

Quietly Georgie pulled on some shorts and a vest and chucked everything in the room into Sean's battered old holdall. The room didn't look all that much worse for wear than when they arrived. Georgie padded silently down the stairs and out to Sean's truck.

Driving with bare feet, she hit the highway and drove until her eyes were blurry. A small town takeaway pizza shop provided some nutrition (and some navigation advice - delivery drivers always being way better than gas station clerks at knowing where roads are) and the heated seat heater kept the dough warm as she munched her way through the whole thing on her own. Eventually the boost from the pizza ran out, pulling into a layby before she fell asleep at the wheel. When she stopped her heart ached. Georgie had a special attachment to Sean - since she'd first hooked up with him at a grotty HackerCon bar she'd been able to know where he was... literally exactly where he was in the world. She felt it like a sadness when he was away from her... it was more than that though - it was a compass. She already knew that she was a Freak by the time that she met him so when she found out that he was too she thought that this maybe went some of the way to explaining their connection. She curled up on the back seat of the pickup and tried to get some sleep.

By morning Georgie knew that Sean had been taken much further away by a plane, a helicopter or a train - waking up hurt like a punch to the chest. She drove as fast as she dared, the sensation of loss gradually lessening as she wore through the miles. When she reached the coast she realised that the truck was no longer going to be useful - Sean was over the sea somewhere.

Georgie wasn't even sure that she was a Freak at first; it was only when she realised that her ability to find things that were meant to be hidden was a little superhuman. When she realised that her father was hiding a second mobile phone (and the mistress that he used it to call) her mother, not her father, threw her out. That's when she'd hung out with some friends and gone to Hacker Con for the weekend. She was instantly attracted to Sean - and she could see from the speed that he could work on a computer (especially when he thought that no one else was looking) that he wasn't normal either. Somehow they formed a bond - maybe it was because he was alone too - so they'd travelled around, staying in nice hotels when they had decent money, staying in scummier ones when the funds were low.

A quick Google revealed Sean's most likely destination and made the search a little easier - an island military bunker as close to Canada as it was possible to get without wearing a checked shirt and riding a moose. Base Camp X - an old Cold War facility with it's reinforced concrete, steel blast doors, decontamination chambers,

communications aerials, dorms and backup generators - recently taken over as the official home of the US Army Computer Crime Investigative Unit. She drove up the coast until she found a small airport - stopping only to buy some food supplies and the world's cheapest motorbike from a Wal-Mart on the way. Folk music filled the airwaves on every radio channel.

The seaplane pilot was a helpful enough old man, but he still left Georgie to load the cheap 125cc trails bike into the back all on her own. She wished Sean was here to help!

The flight was scenic and seeing the coast this way was one of the most beautiful things Georgie had ever witnessed. As soon as she was off the plane she was down to business. It took only half an hour to reach the woods which served as the edge of the military compound. As she covered the motorbike over with dead branches and leaves she imagined where she could have been tonight had Sean's last hack gone to plan... not every hack was a big money earner but Sean had been promised a cool million dollars for this one. She imagined a night out with a nice new pair of heels, a revealing but not too slutty dress and a gin and tonic for herself and a suit, some real (rather than online) poker and a single malt whisky for Sean. If she got him out then she'd blow all of her savings on a night on the town just like that.

The walk along the fence revealed exactly what she'd expected - no easy way in. She didn't have much of a plan but all she really wanted was to get into the complex and then find Sean. She was fairly sure that getting him out wouldn't actually be all that hard, no one was expecting her since no one had any idea that she could follow him. As the tree line broke and became a rugged, rocky beach Georgie saw what she thought could be a way in - a concrete post about 400 meters out to sea which, she presumed, housed the bunker's air intakes. The water would be absolutely freezing but at least she wouldn't need to be swimming underwater trying to swim into underwater air vents.

Stripping down to her underwear wouldn't have been her first choice but she didn't have a wetsuit and hadn't thought she'd be doing any swimming. What she did have was a carrier bag to wrap a pair of leggings and top in. As she raked through the bag she found Sean's stash - his attempt at a safe... an old sunscreen bottle which had been emptied and housed some money and his cutthroat razor inside. Georgie had no desire to get involved in violence but maybe it was best to have something in reserve. She put that into the bag and tied it as tightly as she could, hoping it would keep the contents dry. The holdall was stuffed unceremoniously into a bush and she sprinted over the slippery rocks.

It wasn't quite dark enough to set off for the swim so she sat shivering with her back against a cliff-like rock. One leg hanging down to the water, the other up close to her body she traced her finger over the octopus tattoo on her thigh. She hadn't taken off

her wooden bangle and she fiddled with that. A strand of her hair blew over her eye and she fiddled with that for a while too. The water looked cold and foreboding but it wasn't too choppy and at least up here in the north she didn't think that there were any sharks to worry about. As the sun dipped below the horizon she dived into the water and, with as few surface breaths as possible, made her way out to the low concrete tower.

She'd expected steps or a ladder but instead she found a greasy, frayed rope. Still, it was better than spending any longer in the water. At the top of the post she found a grating that she could fit through and a slightly rusted 3-digit combination lock. She hunkered down and spent 7 minutes turning number after number until the lock clicked open. Looking down into the shaft she saw darkness, but as she lowered her legs in she found wide iron rungs and an easy route down.

Seeing the inside of an air intake for an air conditioning system wasn't as boring as Georgie had first thought... but whilst there was art there was also a desire to get out as quickly as possible. The service hatch had a big wheel to turn to open it up but it was rusted to bits. Georgie crawled on a little further but was met by a spinning fan. Back braced against the sides of the tube the wheel did eventually open - lifting up with an ominous creak that would have alerted anyone in the base to her intruderness.

Still dripping wet, Georgie hid behind the air conditioning units and pulled on a pair of leggings, a sports bra and an old, too short t-shirt - the only black things that she'd found in her bag - dropping her carrier bag and wet undies back into the air tube before closing the lid. Her bare feet felt cold on the concrete floor - she wished that she had some trainers but took a little joy back in the fact that her nails were painted pinky-red to match her lipstick... at least if she met a guard she might be able to distract them for a moment or two. She was frustrated that she had spent long enough in Wal-Mart to look at the cheap motorbikes and Pop Tarts but hadn't bothered to look at wetsuits, trainers, gloves or balaclavas. No time to ponder her lack of foresight - she set off.

The corridors were more or less deserted as far as she could tell from listening at the door but that didn't make her any less cautious. She followed an indented bannister down stairwells, peeked into each niche in the wall - expecting soldiers at every move. Some corridors had glass ceilings which let light in through from the sea above - the murky sunset let only a little light through at this time of night but Georgie wondered if it might actually look quite pretty during the day.

Something odd happened as she walked along one corridor. Every ten meters or so was a small black box on the ceiling; every time she walked under one her leggings and her top went x-ray, exposing her skeleton brilliant white though her stealthy black clothing. She could see the pin in her left shin from where she'd broken her leg

as a teenager, too stupid to wear lights on her bike as she was cycling home in the dark. As she walked along the corridors every now and then she'd see another black box and she'd get a flash of white as her bones were exposed...the vintage straight razor - with its hickory handle and blackened steel blade - glowed brilliant white in the waistband of her leggings.

The progression around the complex took the best part of three hours but she eventually found the prison rooms complete with a guard who was watching old A-Team reruns on a rewired CCTV screen. She waited and waited and waited, surveying the situation, trying to work out where someone would hide a spare key for the cells. Hidden in plain sight she decided. Eventually the guard got up and walked along the corridor to the toilet. As fast as she could she ran to the pen holder on the desk and raked through... and struck gold! Grabbing the spare key she crossed the corridor to open Sean's door.

Sean looked less of a state than she'd expected - but then he'd felt her coming so had probably smartened himself up. He'd been stripped of his normal clothes... but forced into something smarter; a crude fisherman's arran jumper and a pair of button-down trousers. His hair looked tousled as always, his beard smarter than it sometimes was. They were far down the corridor, cell door safely locked, by the time the guard returned to his seat, not even bothering to check if the folded blanket in the bed actually contained a prisoner or not.

The escape route was only marginally more considered than the entry plan but they made it as far as the icy ocean before the alarms began to sound. Whilst Sean was mainly worrying about whether or not they could swim to Canada Georgie was already doubling back into the complex, sprinting through a maze of corridors to the store room. Uniforms would buy them time... time to hack the computer system, make them both officially soldiers, fake an entry into the logs to say the prisoner had been captured by another base, print some ID badges and refuel in the canteen... or so she hoped! After all, it didn't really matter how long they stayed - she was back with the love of her life and the pain of separation had gone.

Freak #4 - If You Want Something Expensive You Should Ask Your Grandparents

“Toby, put that down. No - I said put that down!”

“Why is he licking the bin?”

“Don’t just stand there - pick him up to stop him doing it! I’m up to my arms in dirty dishwater here.”

“Owwwww!”

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

“What are you doing?! What happened?”

“He just electric shocked me!”

“Don’t be stupid. It’s ok Toby - come to mum. Come for a hug. Owwww!”

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

“What the hell?! That really hurt!”

“Yeah - he gave me a proper electric shock.”

“Guess he must be a Freak too!”

“No, don’t say that. It was just static.”

“Hardly - it would have dissipated by now. Try again.”

“Ow! Christ that hurt.”

“See - definitely not static. And it’s not like there’s a thunderstorm going on or anything. Definitely a Freak - just like you!”

Freak #5 - If You're Not Prepared To Shout It You Shouldn't Say It At All

Innes worked alone in the godforsaken landscape - a half island struggling to hold on to the mainland - with nothing but midges for company. More than two thirds of his life had been spent there but it still found new ways of catching him out. His body had adapted to the cold that he felt whenever he brought in the oyster pots from the bay - especially during the winter - and had become almost invulnerable to the stings and bites that came with the clouds of midges during the summer. Innes hated that his brother Findlay had been in the city studying when his second puberty had come - his Freak nature had manifested itself in a very, very large bladder combined with extremely high alcohol tolerance - ideal when you're a student, not so useful when you grow up... but still something to be envied. Innes, with his workman's hands, near seven foot stature, broad shoulders and weather etched face had chosen a harder life. Out here there weren't mobile phones, there wasn't much by way of electricity and the closest pub was a five day walk in good weather.

Every fortnight on a thursday he'd drag the oyster bags to the shallow pools near the old pier and wait - sometimes the boat would come, sometimes he'd have to wait a day, sometimes a week. Either way, he'd wait, sleeping in the wooden shed he'd built from driftwood at nights when he needed to. It was a tough life but as far as he was concerned someone had to do it. The shellfish he hauled and the wood he harvested put him aside money for the future but that wasn't really the point of it all - mostly Innes wanted to avoid being the man that everyone stared at.

At seventeen he'd dated a girl called Flora for a while - a girl so unbelievable cute some said she had preternatural beauty... and accused her of being a Freak because of it. Of course she was - Innes had found that out the hard way - but not because of her cuteness. Her skill was that she could do this thing where, with a single touch, you would experience exactly the same emotion as she was feeling. The relationship had grown to the point of love but Flora couldn't bear the sadness she kept sharing with him and had ran away from her parents house one morning. Innes had been looked at accusingly but when she'd phoned from France the suspicion dissipated. But the anger and sadness and staring looks remained. Innes left town as soon as he dared.

Every year or so his brother would arrive unannounced on the oyster boat - normally bringing a bottle of expensive whisky and some newfangled camping gear that would inevitably be broken by the time he returned again... Innes wasn't strictly sure if that was a comment on the poor manufacturing quality of goods in the modern day or on how little Findlay visited!

Besides speaking briefly to the boatmen when they came for the oysters and the

people he spoke to whenever he had need to walk out to civilisation, Innes' life was one of a natural peace and quiet which made the sound of a plane crashing all the more monstrous sounding when it happened just after sunset one evening. Innes rolled off his sleeping matt and looked out of his cabin. The treeline was aglow. Although not much of a runner he covered the distance to the hill in no time. In the light of the dying fires he could see that a small jet had crashed into a crag on the hill. Innes began pulling wreckage out of the way, looking for a way into the main body of the plane. He guessed there would be seats for about 20 people... he wondered how many he'd find alive. With an ignorance to self-preservation he ploughed in deeper, pulling red-hot shrapnel out of the way until he found the main door. The door opened awkwardly, no room in the forest floor for the fold-down steps. A large red handle released the door and Innes managed to get over the steps. Inside was carnage - the contents of a food trolley, various items of baggage and several bodies lay all mixed up together. Not knowing how long he had before the fire reached the cabin he tried to see if anyone was still alive - no one shouted but one body near the back moved and coughed so he clambered over and scooped them up.

The survivor later said that it was like something from a disaster movie the way that they got out just as the plane was engulfed with flames... all Innes felt was the rush of flame and the weight of the woman in his arms.

Normally it would have been ten days or so before the regular boat came out to the peninsula but at first light Innes heard a helicopter and ran outside to wave. They took the semi-conscious girl that he'd nursed through the night away, then came back to take a cursory look through the wreckage. Later the investigation party arrived by boat and Innes worked for three days helping the strangers collect bits of plane, moor boats on the old pier and clear space for tents in the woods. He felt like he was being useful for a day or so but hated the intrusion on his space. When the boat left Innes waved from the pier, alone, returning to the life he was adapted for.